

House Foreign Affairs Committee

September 24, 2020 Hearing

**“Oversight of the United States Agency for Global
Media and U.S. International Broadcasting Efforts”**

Testimony of Grant K. Turner

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Thank you Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul,
and members of the committee.

I am testifying today to disclose significant concerns
about the US Agency for Global Media, specifically
related to the dire events that have been unfolding at
the agency over the past few months.

First though, let me start by telling you a little about me
and USAGM.

I have been privileged to serve in the federal civil service as a career employee for 17 years, the last four at this agency. My tenure has spanned multiple Presidential administrations. I worked at OMB for six years, 3 under President Bush and 3 under President Obama. I've served as the Budget Director for the CDC in Atlanta.

I have a lot of experience. But nothing in my 17 years comes close to the gross mismanagement, the abuse of authority, the violations of law that have occurred since Michael Pack assumed the role of CEO in June of this year.

Until I was abruptly removed by Mr. Pack in mid-August, I served as the agency's Chief Financial Officer for four years. For the 9 months preceding Mr. Pack's, I was the Acting CEO. Based on my many interactions with this committee and your staffs -- on a bipartisan basis -- I know you care very much about our mission: to bring truthful news and information to our audiences overseas. I truly thank you for that years' long partnership.

Today, USAGM networks broadcast in 61 languages to over 100 countries worldwide – reaching 350 million viewers, listeners and readers weekly. Our networks, including the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and the Open Technology Fund, are truly a gift from the American people to the world.

We sometimes forget—living in our rich media environment—that much of the world is quite underserved especially when it comes to accurate news and information. As one of my colleagues at this hearing today, Amanda Bennett, is fond of saying: Our organization exports the First Amendment. It's the foundation of our nation's success.

I'm extremely proud of the agency's 4,000 employees. It's a privilege to be associated with the many brave journalists and editors, the production specialists, technology experts, and support staff. They are passionate about the work. I cannot tell you how much I admire them.

During the past 4 years the agency made notable and important progress, especially thanks to the input and support from this Committee. Thank you. We have modernized the platforms that we broadcast on, moving as media markets evolve and going to where our audiences want us to be. From Radio to TV to social media.

A testament to how well the agency has performed in the last several years is born out by numerous metrics. For instance, between the beginning of FY 2016 and now, our global weekly audience has grown from 226 million per week to 350 million per week -- a 55% increase. It's a good example demonstrating that we have responded -- effectively -- to fast-moving media markets worldwide. It's a tangible demonstration that people across the globe crave the truth -- because that what USAGM is all about.

My colleagues are journalists. We are not here to message propaganda (that's what others do). Our Charters mandate that editorial decisions are made

without outside influence – that they are protected by what we refer to as a Firewall. And the Firewall is far more than an abstract concept. It is law. And it has been the law for over three decades. It requires us to ensure journalistic independence.

Our audiences often live in places that are awash in government spin, propaganda, and misinformation; or countries where there simply is no press. We fill the vacuum with journalism that aims to be best in class.

Unfortunately, I'm here to report on significant problems that have befallen the Agency since CEO Pack arrived. I have deep concerns about the trajectory the agency is on. I know many of you -- on a bipartisan basis -- share these concerns.

Like you, I'm worried about the credibility and the goodwill of our networks being destroyed. It has taken literally decades to build this trust with our audiences. Tragically, it can be destroyed far more quickly. That is what is happening now.

I'm worried about our failure to support important technology tools developed by the Open Technology Fund. OTF funds internet firewall circumvention tools used by our audiences in Iran and China and Russia and other closed societies to freely access the internet and our content. The Open Technology Fund also supports privacy tools that human rights activists around the world depend on to remain free from government surveillance and tracking. They are used by persecuted minorities like the Uyghur people in China, LGBT youth in Africa, and our own journalists and sources worldwide.

But within days of Mr. Pack's arrival, he declared war on OTF. First, he started by firing its leadership. Then, he froze its funding.

As CFO, I sent an urgent email to Mr. Pack's team. I essentially pleaded for permission to release funds to OTF. I highlighted what was at stake. For instance in the

case of Iran, we risked losing 84% of our audience if we didn't fund OTF's tools.

To put this in context, we are the number one international broadcaster in Iran. Many people don't know this. We have nearly 25% of Iranian adults tuning in to our coverage each week.

Here is a country where we worry about war breaking out, where the Iranian people are fed a steady diet of misinformation and half-truths about America. But every night, a quarter of Iranian adults tune into USAGM. From the VOA studio in the basement of the Cohen building two blocks from here, we bring unfiltered truthful news about America, our policies, and our country's values. That is tremendous soft power. It's good for building a more peaceful world.

But my urgent plea for funding was met with silence from Mr. Pack and his staff -- an indifferent shrug. It was shocking.

OTF is not the only example. Far from it. In the two and a half months I worked under Mr. Pack, he repeatedly breached the Firewall designed to protect journalists and editors from political influence.

Months ago he removed the Standards Editor at Voice of America – the person in the agency who is supposed to ensure on a day to day basis that we follow the best practices of balanced journalism. The position remains vacant to this day. He removed Bay Fang from her role as Executive Editor of Radio Free Europe—the person who would lead our overall China strategy at that network.

It was Mr. Pack who simultaneously fired the Presidents of the agency's networks, including Jamie Fly who is testifying here today. Amanda Bennett resigned the day before the simultaneous firings.

He has also targeted VOA journalists who are foreign nationals who hold J-1 visas which permit them to work in the U.S. These visas need to be renewed every year. Mr. Pack refuses to renew them. The J-1 renewal applications have been sitting on his desk *for months*.

To be clear, Mr. Pack's failure to act risks putting the lives of many of those journalists -- and their families -- in danger. Without renewed visas, some will have to return to their home countries -- including countries that, to put it kindly, "pursue" journalists who don't tow the line.

Getting rid of those journalists is also gross mismanagement. They bring critical skills to the agency -- sometimes decades of experience, language skills we need, and deep cultural knowledge about our audiences. They are very very difficult reporters to replace. And now, after betraying these people, it will be exceedingly difficult to recruit new talent.

As I near the end of my remarks, I would like to just quickly mention a few of the many, irresponsible acts of financial mismanagement that has taken hold under Mr. Pack. For example, I found myself frequently fielding calls from the leadership of our grantee networks who were being starved of resources because Mr. Pack's team would not disburse funds on a timely basis. Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia both indicated that if they didn't receive funding soon, they couldn't make payroll.

Mr. Pack's team refused to approve a simple cleaning contract for our Kuwait Shortwave Facility. In the middle of a pandemic.

They refused—for weeks—to approve a contract to order toilet paper for our Thailand transmitting facility. This had nothing to do with shortages of toilet paper during the pandemic. We had sources identified. Mr. Pack's team just didn't want to approve the order. I don't know why. So staff just brought their own toilet paper from home. That unusual problem still existed when Mr. Pack fired me. For all I know, it still hasn't been fixed.

Based on what I've witnessed—from small issues to very big ones—I don't believe Mr. Pack and his team came to run the agency. I don't think they even like it. This just isn't what normal people do. It isn't what normal management looks like; not in the world I come from. And I fear their mismanagement will continue to erode the performance of the agency, and with any misstep, they will use that to justify firing more people, and to continue diminishing the agency with each turn.

To close, we need your help. Please continue to practice the kind of strong oversight you are doing today. It is truly helpful and it may stop or at least slow the abuses you are hearing about. USAGM is a very valuable agency to help create the kind of world that most Americans want to live in.

I look forward to answering any of your questions.

Thank you.